



THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY
STORY

MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S PERIODICAL FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH

SUMMER 2020

VOL. 63
NO. 1



At the Hands of Parties Unknown: The 1880
Lynchings in Montgomery County, Maryland

By Sarah Hedlund





Montgomery History envisions an active intellectual life rooted in an understanding and appreciation of our individual and collective histories. Its mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and share the histories of all of Montgomery County's residents and communities.

The Montgomery County Story, in publication since 1957, features scholarly articles on topics of local interest. It is the only journal solely devoted to research on the rich and colorful past of Montgomery County, Maryland.

Montgomery County Story Editorial Board

Eileen McGuckian
Ralph Buglass

Jane Burgess
Matthew Logan

Robert Plumb
Cara Seitchek

Mark Walston

Montgomery History Board of Directors

Larry Giammo, *President*
Daniel Dwyer, *Vice President*
Barbara Kromer, *Treasurer*
Shaunta Vaughn, *Secretary*

Robert Bachman
Fred Evans

Kim Jones
Margit Nahra

Sue Reeb
Steve Roberts

Karla Silvestre
Ian Shuman

Staff

Matthew Logan, *Executive Director*
Matt Gagle, *Director of Programs*
Sarah Hedlund, *Librarian & Archivist*
Elizabeth Lay, *Collections Manager*
Kurt Logsdon, *Weekend Coordinator*
Sarah Marsteller, *Director of Development & Communications*
Stacie Vodra, *Office Manager*

At the Hands of Parties Unknown: The 1880 Lynchings in Montgomery County, Maryland

By Sarah Hedlund

Though they likely never met, George Peck and John Diggs-Dorsey had much in common: they both worked on rural farms in Montgomery County and lived in relative isolation without family nearby; they were both black men in their early twenties accused but not convicted of assaulting white females; and within six months of each other in 1880, they were both terrorized and murdered by white men, their lives choked out at the end of a rope.

The Era of Racial Terror Lynching

In 2017, the Equal Justice Initiative published research documenting more than 4,000 racial terror lynchings in America between 1877 and 1950.¹ Based on fanatical fears regarding interracial sex and the desire to maintain white supremacy through an unquestioned racial hierarchy, lynchings during the post-Reconstruction era (1877 onward) in former slave states like Maryland became particularly targeted to terrorize the black population, often carried out over any infraction, real or imagined.² The extra-judicial nature of lynching allowed former enslavers to continue to exert dominance, power, and control over black people.³ Maryland's statewide number of lynchings has not been definitively established, as research is ongoing. The number varies between 28 and 40 depending on the time period under consideration, and the majority took place on the Eastern Shore.⁴ Lynching activity nationwide peaked between 1880 and 1900, and at least 20 of Maryland's cases took place within that period,⁵ including the three documented lynchings in Montgomery County: George Peck and John Diggs-Dorsey in 1880 and Sidney Randolph in 1896. This article focuses on the two lynchings that occurred in 1880: a dark page from Montgomery County's past that has often been omitted completely from published histories.

Montgomery County, Maryland: After the Civil War

Maryland's political and social climate throughout the Civil War was complex, due in no small part to its strategic proximity to Washington and its tenuous status as a slaveholding state that never seceded from the Union. After a brief period of Lincoln-Republican leadership in Maryland, culminating in ratification of a new state Constitution in 1864 that emancipated more than 5,000 individuals, politics after the war swung dramatically in the other direction. By 1867, Maryland saw a re-enfranchisement of former slaveholders, an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to collect reparations from the federal government for lost human property, and in multiple areas including Montgomery County, a persistent culture of white supremacy where the specter of potential "negro domination" at the polls kept the former-Confederate Democrats solidly in power across local politics for decades.⁶ The Republican party also had supporters County-wide, most concentrated in the Quaker community in Sandy Spring, but they rarely prevailed in elections.⁷

There had been virtually no celebration of the centennial of America's Independence on July 4, 1876 in Montgomery County, where the holiday was seen by many former Confederate supporters as an opportunity for the Union states to relive their victory over the South.⁸ Instead, most residents enthusiastically celebrated the centennial of Montgomery County itself, which occurred on September 6 of the same year, in a day-long ceremony of speeches and songs revering local heroes and sharing historical reminiscences.⁹ By 1880, the small towns and rural farming communities that constituted Montgomery County were poised to embrace the real estate and industry boom that would surge across the countryside atop the B&O Railroad tracks throughout the 1880s and 1890s, yet also still grappling with the effects of the post-Reconstruction-era economic depression that beset the country starting in 1877.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the newspaper based in Rockville, the *Montgomery County Sentinel*, had consistently published content with a strong bias toward the Democratic party view. With few exceptions, the paper reported on the activities of the black residents of the County (who made up at least one-third of the population in 1880) only when they came into conflict with the law.

George Peck (born c.1858, died 1880)



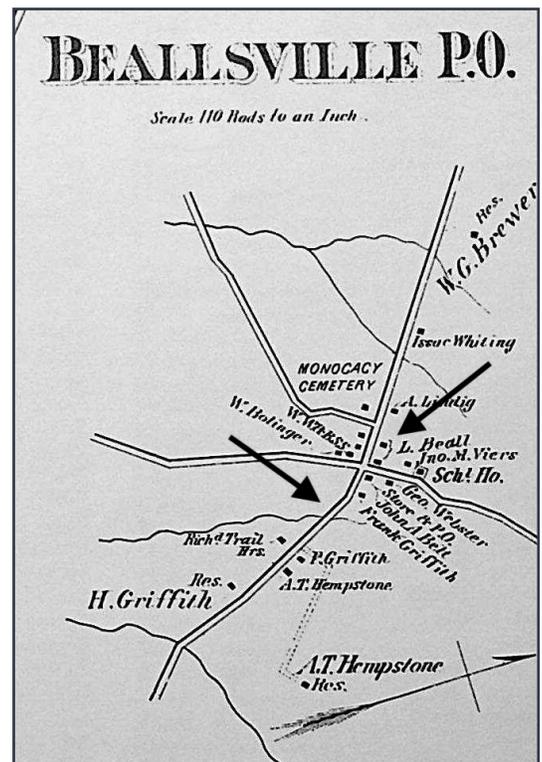
Street scenes in Poolesville in 1864 (left) and 1908 (right). The town retained its essential character throughout the latter half of the 19th century. (Photo credits: *Montgomery History*)

In 1880 Poolesville, life had changed very little in the years since the war. As the Potomac River nearby was a key strategic point for army encampments, both Union and Confederate troops had marched alternately through the town during the fighting.¹¹ Poolesville's proximity to Virginia made it more sympathetic to the cause of the Confederacy than other parts of the County. After the skirmish at Harper's Ferry, the residents of Poolesville swore allegiance to the South, dedicating their resources "to protect and defend Southern rights against the aggression of the North."¹² At the end of the conflict, Poolesville quietly rebuilt and repaired the extensive damage left by the war, incorporating as a town in 1867 and slowly transitioning from small rural farming to increasingly industrialized agriculture.¹³ Meanwhile, local emancipated and now land-owning blacks established settlements in and around Poolesville starting in 1865, including Jonesville, Jerusalem, and Sugarland, which became one of the largest.¹⁴ These grew alongside several already-existing free black communities nearby such as Big Woods, Mt. Ephraim, and Martinsburg.¹⁵ Many residents of these numerous and diverse local black communities continued to work in neighboring white communities--on the farms and in nearby Seneca Quarry--while building and expanding their own independent communities of residence. However, some of the formerly enslaved did become tenants and servants on the same farms where they had been forced to work as slaves.¹⁶ Comparing the 1867 Slave Statistics with the United States Census of 1870 shows migration between households as former slaves became live-in servants in white households, but in many cases the geographic locations of individuals in that smaller segment of the local black population stayed consistent.¹⁷ One of these black laborers living within the white community was a young man named George Peck.

George W. Peck had lived in the Poolesville area since he was a child. He was first documented in the 1867 Slave Statistics as a nine-year-old boy enslaved by William Poole,¹⁸ with no indication of his having family members nearby, then or later. However, along with the young Peck, Poole had held Louisa (King) Lear and five of her children, who stayed in the area following Emancipation and may have maintained contact with Peck. In 1870, Peck was found residing with Howard Griffith and his family near Beallsville, while the Lears lived nearby in the household of John A. Jones.¹⁹ By early 1880, George Peck (about age 21) was working for local storekeeper Lemuel Beall and Louisa Lear (now age 60) was enumerated in Beall's household, working as a cook.²⁰ As they had been enslaved together, it is certain Lear and Peck had known each other for as long as fifteen years before they both worked for Beall.

Lemuel Beall had also recently employed a young white girl named Ada Hayes,²¹ whose family had just moved to the Poolesville area from Loudoun County, Virginia. In 1873, Hyrocles M. Reeves had married Mollie E. Hayes,²² a widow with two young girls, Annie and Ada Hayes, who became Reeves' stepdaughters. The couple had four more children by the time of their move to Montgomery County in 1880,²³ when Ada was eleven years old. Since they didn't stay long enough to appear in a Montgomery County census, it is unclear where the family was residing in January of 1880. The entire family might have been living with Beall,²⁴ or they may have been boarding elsewhere in the region while Ada alone was living at Beall's property and working for him. The Reeves family had left by the time of the 1880 census taken in June,²⁵ so this is guesswork based on local customs, and the clear indication that the family was not wealthy, nor did they own any land.²⁶

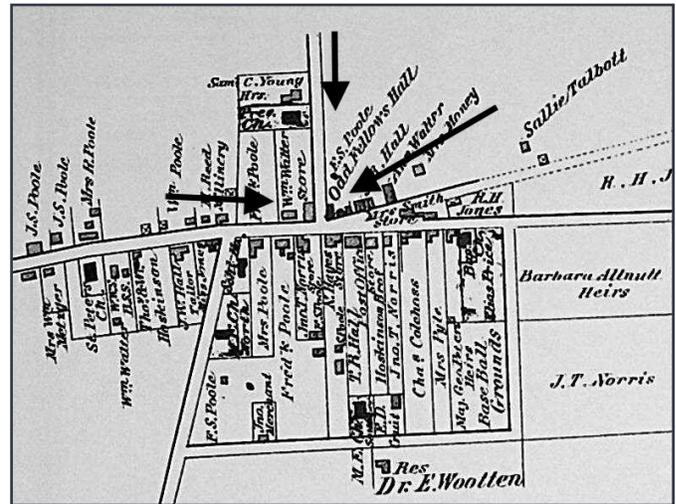
According to newspaper accounts (the only records of the incident currently available), on the morning of Saturday, January 10, 1880, the Reverend Calvin Amy heard screams in the barn near his house. Accounts describe how he discovered George Peck there, apparently in the act of attempting to rape Ada Hayes by forcing her into a straw rick against her will.²⁷ Calvin Amy was the recently-installed pastor at the Baptist Church in Poolesville, having moved his family to a house down the street from Lemuel Beall's in 1879.²⁸ Amy intervened—some sources indicate he happened to be carrying a revolver²⁹—and informed Lemuel Beall of what he had seen; meanwhile, George Peck returned to his duties on the farm.³⁰ The local doctor, John W. Ayler, examined Ada, concluding she was somewhat bruised but otherwise unharmed.³¹ Beall and Amy left the scene to fetch the constable from Poolesville, James Uriah "Hugh" Miles, who had been appointed to the position in 1878.³² Miles was also a nephew of Peck's employer Lemuel Beall, the son of Beall's sister Elvira.³³ When he saw the officer approaching, Peck tried to run into the nearby woods, but was quickly captured by the other men, handcuffed and chained. The constable took him to Poolesville (about 1.5 miles away) and brought him before local Justice of the Peace Stephen G. Donohoe, where he allegedly admitted his guilt, and his intention to complete the act of rape if he had not been interrupted.³⁴ Newspaper reports about black men accused of crimes often contained this common element: a "confession" reported, though usually after the fact by the same law enforcement officers who later allowed the prisoners in their charge to be abducted and killed.



Hopkins Atlas of 1879, showing the residence of Lemuel Beall (at right) and the approximate location of the residence of Calvin Amy (at left).

Miles did not immediately take Peck to the jail in Rockville. A journey to Rockville would have taken at least four hours at this time; however, as the jailer lived in the building and could be roused to admit a prisoner, captors often did arrive at the jail at any hour of the night. Instead of transporting Peck to the jail, the constable held him in the Odd Fellows Hall in Poolesville, ostensibly intending to take him to Rockville on Monday morning.³⁵ This decision put Peck in considerably increased danger from locals who knew he was not secured by the Sheriff in the County jail, but merely in the sole custody of a small-town constable. Indeed, as news of the incident spread through the area, an angry crowd began to gather around the building, and Miles reconsidered his plan. He decided to move Peck from the Odd Fellows Hall to his own residence for the night, indicating to at least one reporter that he did not wish “to leave him unguarded.”³⁶

By 11:00 pm, Miles thought the crowd had dispersed. Taking the shackled Peck with him, he walked across the street to the general store run by William T. Walter to pick up a few items on his way home.³⁷ Several sources state this action took place between 11:00 pm and 12:00 am, though it seems improbable that a store would still be open. A gunshot signal sounded in the street, and a group of 35 to 100 men entered the store and seized Peck, overpowering Miles. Accounts vary widely on numbers, though the lower end seems more likely given the population of the town. Some of the men were wearing masks, but most “made no effort whatever to conceal their identity, and were easily recognized, nearly all of them being residents of Beallsville.”³⁸ Several men cried “Lynch him!” Some accounts state members of the party subdued Miles and blindfolded him; others say that he was injured in his struggles to fight off the crowd. One account states the stove inside the general store was pushed over, almost setting fire to the building.³⁹ The men forced a noose around Peck’s neck and dragged him across the road, throwing him over a post-and-rail fence into a vacant lot across from the Poolesville Presbyterian Church. According to later accounts, Peck verbally pleaded for his life, but made little physical resistance. Then they tossed the rope over a low branch of a locust tree, hoisting Peck five feet in the air, and tied the end to the fence rail. Once they thought he was dead the men slowly dispersed. Some articles claim they also fired bullets into Peck’s body, which “took effect.”⁴⁰



Hopkins Atlas of 1879 detail of downtown Poolesville, showing the locations of the Odd Fellows Hall, (right arrow) Walter’s store (left arrow), and the property across from the Presbyterian Church thought to be the site of the lynching (center arrow).



Above left: Poolesville Presbyterian Church c. 1900. It appears much the same today (Photo credit: Poolesville Presbyterian Church). Above right: This photo is attributed as the “buggy parking lot” for the Poolesville Presbyterian Church, probably 1895-1915. It is possible this view was taken from the road and may depict a portion of the land on which George Peck was killed in 1880. It also shows a rail fence, of the type Peck was hauled over on his way to the tree. (Photo credit: Montgomery History)

Reports indicate that Peck was still hanging, in full view of the townspeople and only 50 yards from the Presbyterian Church, until 9:00 am or 10:00 am on Sunday morning, when his body was finally cut down (possibly by Miles himself). This was likely not an oversight but an intentional message for the community, most especially for black members of the community. Justice Donahoe summoned a local jury of inquest to hear testimony and render a verdict on cause of death. The *Baltimore Sun* stated that the jury could not unanimously agree on the statement of verdict, as some insisted on endorsing the actions of the lynching party, and therefore the Justice discharged this first jury. The report then listed a second jury, composed of Charles Elgin, Fremont Jones, Frank Williams, William Griffith, Lemuel Beall, Richard Spates, Frank Spates, Frank Sparrough, Charles Matthews, G. Mackintosh, Thomas Davis, and Thomas Fyffe, who “re-entered a verdict of death by strangulation at the hands of unknown parties.”⁴¹ The jury represented established landowners and community leaders from families with residential longevity in the Poolesville/Beallsville area at the time, including many former slaveowners.⁴² The names of the initial discharged jurors were not given in this article. Other accounts do not mention names of any jurors, nor the existence of a discharged jury, and state that no attempt was made to identify the perpetrators (though according to earlier statements, most were easily recognized).⁴³ All reports framed George Peck as a known convict who had been in jail before and accused of similar crimes in the past, though it is unlikely, especially during this time period, that he would still be employed in the same small town in which he had lived his entire life if this were the case. No records or newspaper accounts have been found that support these statements of his previous deeds alleged in the press.

Peck’s body was moved to a stable shed, and later “buried quietly in a field.”⁴⁴ According to the *Sun*, within days he was “exhumed by colored people and buried in their churchyard near the village.”⁴⁵ This probably refers to Elijah United Methodist Church Cemetery on Beallsville Road just outside of Poolesville, property used by the African American community for a church, school, and cemetery since 1870. There is evidence of burials starting then, most unmarked, which predated the construction of the first church building.⁴⁶ In the *Hopkins Atlas*, it is marked as a “colored schoolhouse.” It is likely that George Peck’s remains are buried there still. The local black community’s act of claiming his body and the dignity conveyed by a churchyard burial suggests he was not a notorious criminal, but simply one of their own. The records of this church were lost in a fire in 1950.



View of Elijah Methodist Church Cemetery, 2018. Likely the final resting place of George Peck. (Photo credit: Glenn Wallace)

The 1880 census was taken in June of that year, five months after the lynching. By then both Calvin Amy’s family and the Reeves family had left Montgomery County. Reeves moved to Baltimore; Annie and Ada, the older Hayes girls (now with the last name Reeves) were recorded as working in a cotton mill near Hampden.⁴⁷ Twenty years later, by the next extant census in 1900, many of the Medley District people named in the incident were either deceased or had dispersed to other areas.⁴⁸

A Note About A Name

The second documented victim of a lynching in Montgomery County was a man most newspaper articles referred to as John Diggs. It was stated by many newspaper reports that he had several “aliases” including John Dorsey, John Williams, and that he alternately used the given name Henry, but it is unclear where that information about his name(s) originated. In the 1880 census, he was indicated as living with or near James and Mary Tschiffely (pronounced “Shiff-AY-lee”), for whom he worked, and was enumerated as John Dorsey.⁴⁹ The census also indicated John Dorsey was illiterate, yet later reports stated he received a letter from his father, and one report from the lynching event quoted him as saying he had written letters to several people, explaining his situation.⁵⁰ It’s possible that the census-taker was given the information about John Dorsey by his employer rather than by the man himself, which brings the accuracy of the census information into question. Concurrently, several newspapers—including the local Sentinel—told his story beginning with the name John Diggs (used once) but then referred to him as Dorsey for the remainder of the article, suggesting that was the name he used locally.⁵¹ At this time, historians have no concrete evidence of his physical location or his family origins prior to 1880, and no direct information supporting a hypothesis for which name he identified with, or preferred. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to him as “John Diggs-Dorsey,” honoring both names in an attempt to represent his identity as fully as is possible, from a remove of 140 years.

John Diggs-Dorsey *(born 1856-1860, died 1880)*

In contrast to Poolesville, the Rockville area in 1880 had already experienced the earliest revitalizing effects of the B&O Railroad’s Metropolitan Branch line, which stretched up from Washington allowing faster transport of crops like wheat and corn as well as dairy products from newly diversified Montgomery County farms. Early speculation from real estate developers and the success of the first resort hotels catering to wealthy residents of Washington looking for a summer retreat began to increase the value of land in the County by the end of the 1870s. As a result, areas nearer to the Washington border started engaging in manufacturing and service industries besides traditional farming and milling. But progress was slow-going. After the auspicious opening of the Metropolitan Branch line in 1873, the County, along with the rest of the country, had slid into an economic depression by 1877. The effects lasted several years, delaying improvements to the new rail system and increasing the number of migrant workers (sometimes referred to as “tramps”) roaming the County looking for work.⁵² The “boom” of the later 1880s was still in the future.

Darnestown, the setting of the incident that led to the second Montgomery County lynching, bore many similarities to Poolesville in 1880. The populations of the two towns contained 200 and 275 people respectively; the majority of residents were involved in farming, and Darnestown had also endured raids and occupation by Union troops during the Civil War, followed by steady community development post-war. It’s not exactly clear where the life of John Diggs-Dorsey fit within the history of Montgomery County, but the story of his death, like the Metropolitan line itself, spreads across the County from Darnestown to Gaithersburg, into Washington, out to Sandy Spring and back to Rockville, the final stop.

According to Linnie Tschiffely's story, Diggs-Dorsey came to the back door of the house later that night, demanding wine⁶⁰ (or money)⁶¹ and when she refused, he forcibly entered the house and locked the door. She said he "boldly announced his intention to outrage her," choked her insensible, and took her upstairs.⁶² She claimed through innuendo that he raped her and forced her to remain in the bedroom with him throughout the night, threatening to tie her up and burn the house with her inside if she tried to get away.⁶³ She stated she did escape in the early morning hours and attempted to reach a neighbor's house, but that he caught her escaping, dragged her back into the house by her hair, and struck her with the arm of a chair (or with his fists) disfiguring her face and damaging at least one eye.⁶⁴ He then allegedly ransacked the house but found nothing of value to steal, and left in the early morning on foot, rather than taking either of two horses.⁶⁵ The injured Tschiffely related how she then crawled to the West house across the street, where Amos West raised the alarm, starting a manhunt for Diggs-Dorsey. Tschiffely gave this narrative to one or more reporters; the story printed in multiple newspapers is her version of the events of July 24-25, 1880. No newspaper printed a corollary verbatim account of John Diggs-Dorsey's version of events, though several reporters interviewed him directly. Extrapolating from the few second-hand statements that were printed, Diggs-Dorsey implied the sexual encounter was consensual, and that he walked off his employer's property on Sunday morning, having been dismissed by Linnie Tschiffely. According to almost all newspaper reports, Diggs-Dorsey vehemently denied beating her, or physically harming her in any way.

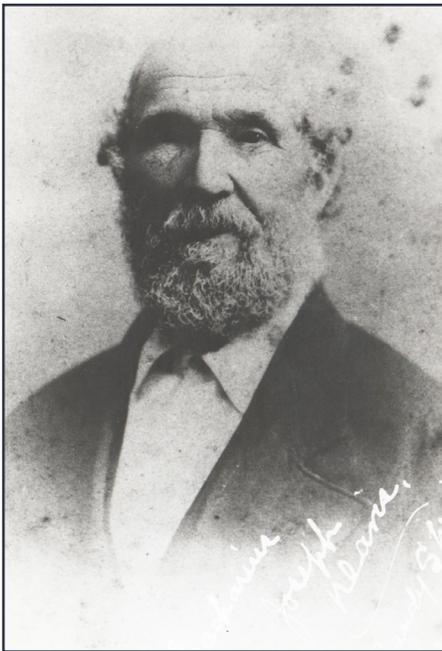
By Sunday morning, July 25, word had spread about the attack on James Tschiffely's wife, and a "vigilance committee" was formed in Montgomery County to search for Diggs-Dorsey, who was now considered a fugitive.⁶⁶ These men, including two of Tschiffely's brothers, tracked bare footprints from the Tschiffely property through plowed fields heading toward Gaithersburg, and surmised that Diggs-Dorsey may have boarded a freight train at the depot there, going to Washington.⁶⁷ The postmaster recalled a letter delivered the day before, for "John Diggs, care of Jas. Tschiffely," still unopened.⁶⁸ The men opened it; the letter, sent from his "affectionate father" John H. (or John E.) Williams, who was living in Washington at 410 E Street, SE, Navy Yard, was a request for money.⁶⁹ A married sister of Diggs-Dorsey's lived near "the insane asylum" as it was referred to by the reporter, at that time the Government Home for the Insane (now called St. Elizabeths Hospital) in Congress Heights.⁷⁰



Gaithersburg's train depot, as it appeared just after the turn of the century. (Photo credit: City of Gaithersburg)

Since they thought John Diggs-Dorsey might have been headed toward Washington, Sheriff John H. Kelchner and/or Frederick A. Tschiffely, Sr. traveled there to notify the authorities, speaking with Detectives McDevitt and Acton at the police station, and showing them the letter.⁷¹ At approximately 1:00 am on Monday morning (July 26), the Williams family homes in D.C. were raided by police; they did not find Diggs-Dorsey, but John Williams and John Diggs-Dorsey's unnamed sister were questioned. Williams said he hadn't heard from his son John in a while and knew only that he was working on a farm and seemed to be doing well. The sister gave a description of her brother ("a very black, round-headed man, between twenty and twenty-three years old, about five feet high, stammered when he talked and blinked his eyes"), but provided no further information on his possible whereabouts.⁷²

The manhunt continued on Monday, July 26, in both Maryland and Washington, with rumors of sightings and elaborate capture stories traveling the gossip mill,⁷³ along with John's physical description: "Look out for and arrest John Dorsey, a very black man, five feet high, between eighteen and twenty years old, dressed in dark coat and pants, slouch hat and white shirt."⁷⁴ In the late afternoon on Monday, Zachariah Joseph Davis was driving back from Germantown via Mechanicsville (Olney) to his home in Sandy Spring, with his two young granddaughters in a horse-drawn wagon.⁷⁵ A few miles outside Mechanicsville around 5:00 or 6:00 pm, he overtook a man fitting the description of the suspect, walking along the road heading in the same direction. Davis called out to him and asked where he was going. According to Davis, the man stated he was looking for work, as he had been dismissed on Saturday morning and paid off.⁷⁶ Davis offered Diggs-Dorsey both a ride to Mechanicsville and help finding work, which he accepted. Once there, Davis drove up outside a store and said, "Hold the lines, John; I want to get something here." He went inside and "came out with a coil of rope, with a noose in one end, and with the help of two or three men who came out of the store with me, I got the noose over his neck and we tied him fast."⁷⁷ According to this same source, Davis stated that keeping his prisoner with him, he drove on to his own house in Sandy Spring to have supper, and gave supper to the still-bound Diggs-Dorsey as well. Davis said, "I then told Diggs that we would have to take him to Rockville, and he replied: 'Yes, I'll go there and I'll kill anybody who says I did any harm to Mrs. Tschiffely.'" Davis then enlisted the help of his son, Edward Davis, and the two drove their prisoner back to Rockville; it was 11:00 pm when they arrived at the door of the jail.⁷⁸ Diggs-Dorsey was turned over to the custody of Sheriff Kelchner, who (realizing a lynch attempt was imminent) quickly assembled a posse of armed local men to secure the building.⁷⁹



Zachariah Davis, pictured here similar to the age he would have been in 1880 (Photo credit: Essie Davis). At right, Davis' house in Sandy Spring, where he allegedly gave supper to his captive, John Diggs-Dorsey. (Photo credit: Montgomery History)

An alternate capture story, reported by one or two Washington sources, stated two young boys spotted Diggs-Dorsey and told several local vigilantes on horseback.⁸⁰ The *Sentinel* reported many people waiting at the train station for hours, expecting the prisoner to arrive from Silver Spring, Beltsville, Washington, or other places.⁸¹ Rumor, conjecture, and false information spread on Monday by word of mouth, by telegraph, and in print.

Once news of Diggs-Dorsey’s capture spread on the evening of Monday, July 26, a crowd began forming in town and many reporters suspected a lynching was likely to occur that night. One paper even printed, via dispatch, “He will probably be lynched to-day.”⁸² A horseman was sent to Darnestown (approximately a 90-minute trip from Rockville each way, on horseback) to deliver the news to the residents there. The crowd gathering in small groups around Rockville had been instructed to wait until James Tschiffely could arrive from Darnestown before moving to kidnap John Diggs-Dorsey from jail.⁸³ Several papers report the Sheriff’s assertion that Diggs-Dorsey gave a full confession to him while in jail, explaining he was drunk that night.⁸⁴ In printing their interpretations of statements allegedly made by John Diggs-Dorsey himself, both while in jail and also while in the clutches of the lynchers, reporters consistently state that he had admitted to committing the “outrage” (i.e, rape) but vehemently denied striking her with a chair or injuring her in any way. Two accounts relate that in his statement to the Sheriff regarding the outrage, he cast aspersions on Linnie Tschiffely (suggesting that in his version of events, the sexual encounter was consensual).⁸⁵ At least three reporters interviewed Diggs-Dorsey one-on-one while he was in his jail cell, yet none of them printed direct quotes the way they had in relating the versions of events given by Tschiffely and Davis.⁸⁶



The Montgomery County Jail was located in Rockville on what is now Maryland Avenue, approximately where the County Council building stands today. Here seen c.1935 just before its demolition. (Photo credit: *Montgomery History*)

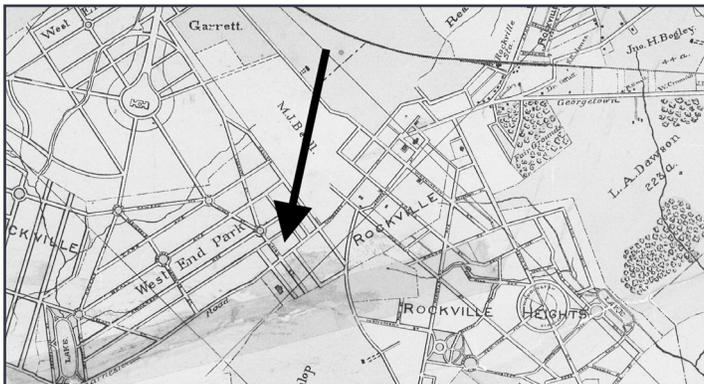
By 3:00 am (now Tuesday, July 27), James Tschiffely and other men from Darnestown had arrived, some in masks and with an appointed “captain;” the group of about 30 to 40 men marched in formation up to the jail and demanded entrance, stating that Tschiffely wished to identify the prisoner.⁸⁷ The Sheriff replied that Tschiffely could come in alone, but the rest had to disperse before he would allow it. This prompted a conference among the group, and they decided to force entry into the jail. Certain individuals were assigned to subdue particular guards.⁸⁸ One report stated an aggressive pair of bloodhounds normally kept at the jail was enticed away.⁸⁹ The group rushed the entrance; four men seized Sheriff Kelchner and pulled

him away from the outer door, which was forced open. William O. Kingsbury, the jailer guarding from inside the building, turned over the keys to the jail cell easily once the Sheriff was subdued.⁹⁰ “I surrender these keys in protest,” said the deputy sheriff [Kingsbury], to which the Sheriff shouted, “Do not give them up at all!”⁹¹ Some members of the deputy posse that the Sheriff had assembled were actually in sympathy with the vigilance-committee-turned-lynch-mob, and quickly changed loyalties.⁹² One of the Sheriff’s deputized men—Samuel Matlack—attempted to brandish a revolver in defense of the prisoner, but was quickly disarmed.⁹³ The Sheriff later stated that if his men had stayed loyal, he could have held the jail against the lynchers,⁹⁴ but among all the armed men enlisted to guard the jail, including the Sheriff himself, only Matlack pulled his gun.

Several reporters, who were camped out since the arrival of the prisoner at Rockville’s jail waiting for the likely outcome,⁹⁵ followed the group of lynchers and stayed among them the entire time. One reporter from Washington had “improvised a bed in the jail yard and requested to be awakened when the fun begins.”⁹⁶ One *Washington Post* article stated that after the lynching party removed the prisoner from the jail, their “correspondent left with the party.”⁹⁷ The *Daily Gazette* report from Wilmington, Delaware stated: “Your correspondent saw the body about one hour after the hanging...” and proceeded to describe gruesome details. Several reporters directly quoted participants, and referred coyly to the leaders of the group by assigned titles— “the captain,” “the leader,” “the horseman,” etc.—even stating those individuals were deliberately unmasked and therefore unconcerned about revealing their identities.⁹⁸ One reporter described the self-appointed leader as a “sturdy, six-foot, wealthy farmer” who was unmasked.⁹⁹ As for James Tschiffely: most sources report he sent word that the lynchers should wait until his arrival in Rockville, “so he could be present for the ending of Diggs.”¹⁰⁰ He was the only named person associated with the lynch party, and the participation of at least two of his brothers might also be presumed, as they were active in the manhunt for John Diggs-Dorsey over the preceding 48 hours, and were likely a portion of “the Tschiffelys” that arrived with the others from Darnestown around 3:00 am.¹⁰¹



House at the corner of Forest Avenue and Montgomery Avenue. Built in 1879, this house would have been on the extreme end of the town of Rockville in 1880; the land beyond was known as West’s farm. (Photo credit: Sarah Hedlund)



An 1890 map created by the B&O Railroad Co. to visualize potential suburban development along the Metropolitan Branch line. The arrow indicates the approximate location of the lynching of John Diggs-Dorsey, on land later developed into the West End neighborhood during the 1890s.

After subduing the Sheriff and breaking into the jail, the men confronted Diggs-Dorsey in his cell, and Tschiffely confirmed his identity.¹⁰² They dragged him out of his cell, and forced him, still in shackles, to walk quickly to a place a one-half to three-quarters of a mile down the road towards Darnestown (now called Route 28/ Montgomery Avenue in Rockville) to property belonging to Julius West,¹⁰³ likely somewhere between current-day Forest Avenue and Laird Street on the north side of the road. The reports were vague about the route taken to the seemingly pre-arranged spot, suggesting the group took their captive via an indirect path on lesser-populated roads before reaching the main road. They were met there, or at a place on the way there, by a man on horseback, pre-arranged. “To those who had been on parties of this kind before, the presence of the horse was easily accounted for,” states the account from the *Post*,¹⁰⁴ alluding to the practice of dropping a hanging victim from a height. The horseman asked those present to form a circle and swear an oath of secrecy: to not reveal the identities of those present, to protect themselves and their families. One reporter quoted this oath: “I do solemnly swear in the presence of Almighty God that I will never reveal the names of those present, or disclose what was done here this day.”¹⁰⁵

Once at the site, the men insisted many times that Diggs-Dorsey should “confess” to his crimes, by which they meant him to show regret or remorse for his actions, but he denied the charges repeatedly. “‘I didn’t do it,’ said Diggs, ‘and you will all suffer for this.’”¹⁰⁶ Another article quoted him as saying, “You are damned cowards to take a man out and hang him without giving him a lawyer.”¹⁰⁷ In apparently “an unexpected turn in the proceedings,”¹⁰⁸ the leader of the party suggested they say a prayer for him, and gave him a few moments of reflection, which he reportedly spent in silence, eyes downcast.¹⁰⁹ Another scuffle ensued, but Diggs-Dorsey was roughly subdued and the noose was fixed around his neck.¹¹⁰ He was asked again if he had anything to say, to which he swore loudly and said “What’s the use of saying anything? You’re going to hang me anyway.”¹¹¹ He referred to two letters he had written about the occurrence, but “not much attention was given to this statement.”¹¹² All accounts describe how they then attempted to seat Diggs-Dorsey on the horse in order to pull it from underneath him, but the animal was too spooked to stand still so that plan was abandoned. Its owner warned it was “a kicker” and someone suggested they let the horse kick their prisoner to death instead. The leader stated, and the men agreed, they were there “to carry out the law,” which meant hanging.¹¹³ They threw the rope over the limb of a large black heart cherry tree¹¹⁴ and John Diggs-Dorsey was hauled up three feet from the ground and hanged until he was dead. The crowd stayed for perhaps 20 to 30 minutes and then dispersed, leaving the body to be discovered at daybreak.



The Montgomery County Alms House, also known as the Poor Farm, taken c. 1910 by Lewis Reed. This is now the location of the Montgomery County Detention Center at the end of Seven Locks Road at Wootton Parkway. Some of the bodies buried there were re-interred at Parklawn Cemetery in the 1960s and 1980s, but many unmarked graves, like that of John Diggs-Dorsey, were turned under and lost. (Photo credit: Montgomery History)

A large crowd gradually gathered around the still-hanging body of John Diggs-Dorsey on the morning of Tuesday, July 27; most papers report several hundred people were present. Around 9:00 am, local Justices of the Peace Mordecai Morgan and John Kriger were informed that “a man had got tangled up in a rope in a tree.”¹¹⁵ They summoned a jury of inquest, consisting of R.A. Sheckells (foreman), Captain James W. Anderson, Nicholas Dorsey Offutt, William A. Veirs, Henry Vielt, James C. Nolan, John Steele, Melchisedec Green, William M. Davis, R.S. Patterson, J.T. Ricketts, John P. Mulfinger, and W.H. Carr. The jury met that morning at the site where the body remained, hearing from several witnesses including Dr. Edward Anderson, who had examined

the body and determined the cause of death as strangulation, and Kingsbury, the jailer, who stated he did not know the identity of any of the perpetrators.¹¹⁶ No other witnesses were mentioned by name. The jury then rendered the “usual verdict in such cases,” that of “death by violence committed by parties unknown,” and the jury was discharged.¹¹⁷ The rope used to hang John Diggs-Dorsey was cut into pieces and taken as souvenirs, as were several items of his clothing. “One enterprising gentleman secured the slouch hat which Diggs wore.”¹¹⁸ Undertaker William R. Pumphrey transported the body to the Potter’s Field near the Alms House, where it was buried in an unmarked grave.¹¹⁹

Judge Bowie vs. Judge Lynch

The news of John Diggs-Dorsey's murder was printed in dozens of newspapers in no fewer than seventeen states. Many articles carried headlines like "Lynch Law in Maryland," or "Terrible Outrage in Maryland," which referred to the inciting incident, not to the lynching, as the outrage. If any opinion was implied, it was usually one in agreement for the punishment of the "brutal negro," a common phrase (among many others) employed to characterize the lynching victim as deserving his fate. *The Washington Post* printed an op-ed piece positively lauding the actions of the lynchers as just and moral,¹²⁰ and *The New York Times* concluded its report of the incident by saying "In the opinion of some, the execution of such brutes...should serve to make their horrible crime more odious than the court processes by which the criminal is made rather a hero during his trial, and if convicted and executed has a glorified send-off into eternity as one who is stepping straight from the gallows into Paradise."¹²¹

This opinion was shared by the *Sentinel*. However, there existed both people and newspapers that spoke out against the local attitudes of complacency around "vigilante justice." On November 19, 1880, the *Sentinel* printed the report of the Grand Jury, the legal body drawn for two terms per year to hear all criminal cases accrued in the months between sessions. Its report: "In regard to the lynching of Diggs, we have been unable to find any evidence that would lead to the conviction of the party or parties connected therewith."¹²² On the same page, the publishers of the *Sentinel* printed a column-long rant, indignant over critical comments made in the *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser* during the previous week.

On November 12, the *Sentinel* openly scorned statements made by Judge Richard Johns Bowie, a respected Maryland jurist. The paper had printed Judge Bowie's charge to the Grand Jury, in which he vehemently censured the lynching of John Diggs-Dorsey, but in an article on the same page, the editor(s) accused him of clinging to the "literal enforcement of the principle of law to cases where it is impotent to be effective as a preventive to like offences, and thereby powerless to afford protection to defenceless women."¹²³ In lengthy prose laid out over multiple columns in two articles, the *Sentinel* averred the court system was inadequate to punish that greatest offense against the flower of Southern womanhood. Further, the editor stated that in these cases, decent men should be allowed to carry out a more efficient (and literal) execution of "the common law," against the accused which should be in turn decently overlooked by the more "literal" letter of the actual law.

That in the execution of such fiendish deeds... deeds where the law has failed to protect the sufferer from mental tortures...the perpetrator has forfeited every right to a legitimate trial by a jury of his peers...That the quick and certain execution of punishment upon the offender brings into active operation that principle of law which declares that the object of the punishment of crime is to deter others from a like perpetration. That it relieves the victims... from further disgrace and punishment, by being dragged first before the grand jury and thence into a court of law. That this course on the part of the individual or the community, furnishes that protection, safety and relief which the very doubtful and tardy action of the courts have failed to give.¹²⁴

The article in the *American* criticizing the attitude of the press in Montgomery County was quoted in the *Sentinel* on November 19:

No language that the Judge could have used would have been too strong to express the abhorrence which all good citizens should feel at the murder of a man by a mob, whether that man be accused of crime or not... It is part of the social contract that the state only shall punish violations of its criminal laws; for individuals to commit murder in the name of justice only adds to their offence. Public justice becomes private revenge, and a mob with a craving for a fiercer excitement than a fox hunt, hunts down a fellow being accused of crime and puts him to a horrible and ignominious death. Sometimes, when too late, it finds that he was innocent.¹²⁵

At the end of that year, two young black men were dead and it seemed the prevailing attitude among the white citizenry was indifference and relief, no matter the circumstances. Historians have not yet discovered any written accounts describing the reactions or opinions of the local black people on these events at the time, but their reality was this: some portion of their white neighbors, employers, and community/religious leaders thought the murder of a black man in the dead of night, in response to accusation alone and without a fair trial, was not only above the law but they considered it an act of righteousness. Judge Bowie was locally and openly criticized for stating one of the most basic tenets of American law: “But who shall say that a man whom the law presumed to be innocent was not so, except a jury of the county by fair and full trial.”¹²⁶ That privilege—innocent until proven guilty in a court of law—was not extended to George Peck nor to John Diggs-Dorsey in 1880, and by implication, was denied to the entire black community of Montgomery County.

About the Author

Sarah Hedlund holds a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Maryland with a specialization in archives and digital curation. She is currently the Librarian and Archivist for Montgomery History, having joined the staff in 2016. She presented her research on the three Montgomery County lynchings at an event co-hosted by Montgomery History and the Montgomery County Lynching Memorial Project in March, 2020, as well as presenting her research methodology to the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission in June. Previous to Sarah’s position with Montgomery History, she worked as a freelance contract archivist, a graduate assistant archivist for the University of Maryland’s Special Collections and University Archives, and an archival intern in the Archives Center of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

Acknowledgments

THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS FOR THEIR RESEARCH ASSISTANCE:

Ralph Buglass	Scott Jung
Tony Cohen	Jay Mallin
Linda Frydl	Carolyn Sowinski
Doug Hill	Jeff Sypeck
Paul Holmes	Emily Wurtz

Notes

1. Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror, 3rd Edition" (Montgomery, AL: EJI, 2017), 4.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Ida B. Wells, "Southern Horrors," in Mia Bay, ed., *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 69.
4. Maryland State Archives: Legacy of Slavery in Maryland. *Judge Lynch's Court*, http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/casestudies/judge_lynch.html (June 3, 2020).
5. Maryland State Archives: Legacy of Slavery in Maryland. *Judge Lynch's Court*, http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/casestudies/lynch_statisticaltables.html (June 3, 2020).
6. Richard K. MacMaster and Ray Eldon Hiebert, *A Grateful Remembrance: the Story of Montgomery County, Maryland* (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Government, 1976), 188/194.
7. *Ibid.*, 198.
8. "Grand Celebration of the Fourth," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, July 7, 1876, and MacMaster and Hiebert, 197.
9. "Centennial Celebration of the Erection of Montgomery County, Maryland into a Separate Municipality, held at Rockville, September 6, 1876." (Baltimore, MD, 1877).
10. MacMaster and Hiebert, 195, and Robert J. Brugger, *Maryland: A Middle Temperament, 1634-1980* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 341.
11. Martha Sprigg Poole, "The Early History of Poolesville," *Montgomery County Story* 4:4 (August, 1961).
12. MacMaster and Hiebert, 162.
13. Dona Cuttler and Dorothy Elgin, *The History of Poolesville* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2000), 22.
14. Suzanne Johnson and Gwen Reese, "The Sugarland Community" *Montgomery County Story* 53:1 (Spring, 2013).
15. George McDaniel, *Black Historical Resources in Upper Western Montgomery County* (Montgomery County, MD: Sugarloaf Regional Trails, July 1979).
16. Eileen S. McGuckian, *Rockville: Portrait of a City* (Franklin, TN: Hillsboro Press, 2001), 61.
17. This census, compiled in 1867, was commissioned by the General Assembly in Maryland to request compensation from the federal government for lost human property. As former slaveowners in Maryland, a state that had not seceded from the Union, claimants were asked to provide the names and ages of those people they had enslaved as of Emancipation in 1864, in order to determine their value at that time. The claims were ultimately rejected by the government and no compensation was issued to Marylanders.
18. Jane C. Sween (transcribed), *Slave Statistics, 1867-1868* (Montgomery County: Commissioner of Slave Statistics, 1867-1868).
19. William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), *1870 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 182/205, and *1880 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 66. Note that the Lear family's surname in 1870 is mis-transcribed as "Sear" and otherwise often enumerated in other homophonic variations (Lair, Leah, Layer, etc.).
20. "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, January 12, 1880.
21. *Ibid.* Most newspaper accounts spell the name Hays, though her mother's marriage record indicates the name was Hayes (see note 22).
22. Patricia B. Duncan and Elizabeth R. Frain, *Loudoun County, Virginia Marriages after 1850: Volume I, 1851-1880* (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2000), 185.
23. *United States Federal Census: Population Schedule, 1880*, www.ancestry.com (August 15, 2019).
24. "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Shepherdstown Register* [Shepherdstown, WV], January 17, 1880.
25. Hurley (1880).
26. Maryland State Archives, *Montgomery County Land Records: Active Indices, Grantee Index*, www.mdlandrec.net (September 9, 2019).
27. "Lynch Law in Maryland," *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], January 13, 1880.
28. J.F. Weishampel, Jr., *History of Baptist Churches in Maryland* (Baltimore, MD, 1885).
29. "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
30. "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Wheeling Register* [Wheeling, WV], January 14, 1880.
31. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*The Sun*).
32. John D. Bowman, *Guide to Selections from the Montgomery County Sentinel: January 1, 1876-December 31, 1881* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2005), 61.
33. *Beall Family File*. Montgomery History: Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections (August 12, 2019).
34. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*The Sun*).
35. *Ibid.*
36. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Wheeling Register*).
37. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
38. "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
39. *Ibid.*
40. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
41. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*The Sun*). Several of the names were misspelled or given incorrectly in the newspaper article. Names listed here have been corrected according to local sources.
42. Sween.
43. "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
44. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
45. "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*The Sun*).

Notes

46. Irene C. Pierce, *A History of Elijah United Methodist Church and Cemetery* (Poolesville, MD: Historic Medley District, Inc., 1995).
47. *United States Federal Census: Population Schedule, 1880*, www.ancestry.com (August 15, 2019).
48. William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), 1900 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2000),
49. Hurley (1880), 431.
50. "Suspended at Sunrise," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1880.
51. "A Fiendish Outrage," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, July 30, 1880.
52. MacMaster and Hiebert, 195.
53. Hurley (1880), 431.
54. "Terrible Outrage—A Maryland Lady Brutally Assaulted." *The Sun*, July 26, 1880.
55. "Terrible Outrage in Maryland." *Evening Star* [Washington, DC], July 26, 1880.
56. *U.S. Presbyterian Church Records, 1701-1907*, www.ancestry.com (October 15, 2019). [Original source: Presbyterian Historical Society Church Records].
57. Maryland State Archives, *Montgomery County Land Records: Active Indices, Grantee Index* [Original source: Book EBP10, Page 484-485], www.mdlandrec.net (September 9, 2019).
58. Several newspapers, including the *Montgomery County Sentinel*, *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, and *Evening Star*, printed quotes from the same interview with Mrs. Tschiffely, given exclusively to a reporter from the *Baltimore Gazette*. An extant issue of the *Gazette* containing the original interview has not yet been found.
59. "A Fiendish Outrage."
60. *Ibid.*
61. "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
62. "Terrible Outrage—A Maryland Lady Brutally Assaulted."
63. "A Fiendish Outrage."
64. "A Tale of Brutality," *National Republican* [Washington, DC], July 26, 1880.
65. "A Fiendish Outrage."
66. "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
67. "A Fiendish Outrage."
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*
70. "Terrible Outrage in Maryland."
71. *Ibid.*
72. "A Tale of Brutality."
73. "The Montgomery County Outrage Case," *The Sun*, July 27, 1880.
74. "A Tale of Brutality."
75. "A Fiendish Outrage."
76. "The Montgomery Outrage," *Evening Star*, July 27, 1880.
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*
79. *Ibid.*
80. "To Be Lynched At Dawn," *National Republican*, July 27, 1880.
81. "A Fiendish Outrage."
82. "The negro Diggs..." *Alexandria Gazette* [Alexandria, DC], July 27, 1880.
83. "To Be Lynched At Dawn."
84. *Ibid.*
85. "The Montgomery Outrage;" and *Delaware State Journal* [Wilmington, DE], July 29, 1880.
86. Reporters from *The Washington Post*, the *Evening Star*, and *The Sun* all made reference to speaking with Diggs-Dorsey or hearing his side of events.
87. "Lynch Law in Maryland," *The Sun*, July 28, 1880.
88. *Ibid.*
89. "Suspended at Sunrise."
90. "The End of Diggs," *Tennessee Public Ledger* [Memphis, TN], July 27, 1880.
91. "Suspended at Sunrise."
92. "Judge Lynch," *Wilmington Daily Gazette*, July 28, 1880.
93. "Diggs Lynched," *National Republican*, July 28, 1880.
94. "The Montgomery Outrage."
95. "To Be Lynched at Dawn."
96. *Ibid.*
97. "Caught and Confessed," *The Washington Post*, July 27, 1880.
98. "A Brutal Negro Lynched," *The New York Times*, July 28, 1880.
99. "Judge Lynch."
100. "The Montgomery County Outrage Case."

Notes

101. "Caught and Confessed."
102. "Judge Lynch."
103. *Ibid.*
104. "Suspended at Sunrise."
105. "Judge Lynch."
106. "A Brutal Negro Lynched."
107. "Judge Lynch."
108. "Suspended at Sunrise."
109. "Diggs Lynched."
110. "Shocking Outrage by a Negro Man," *The Democratic Advocate* [Westminster, MD], July 31, 1880.
111. "The Montgomery Outrage."
112. "Suspended at Sunrise."
113. "A Brutal Negro Lynched."
114. "Judge Lynch."
115. "The Montgomery Outrage."
116. "A Fiendish Outrage."
117. "Lynch Law in Maryland."
118. "Diggs Lynched."
119. "Suspended at Sunrise."
120. "A Summary Lynching," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1880.
121. "A Brutal Negro Lynched."
122. "A Daniel Comes to Judgment," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, November 19, 1880.
123. "Judge Bowie's Charge," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, November 12, 1880.
124. "A Daniel Comes to Judgment."
125. *Ibid.*
126. "Judge Bowie's Charge to the Grand Jury," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, November 12, 1880.



111 W. Montgomery Avenue,
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Rockville, MD
Permit No. 24

Thank You to Our Sponsor:



For more than 125 years, The Chevy Chase Land Company has owned, managed and developed exceptional office, retail and residential properties throughout the Washington, DC region. The Land Company is distinguished by its historic background and ongoing commitment to investing in its community.

LIBRARY, ARCHIVES & MUSEUMS

Jane C. Sween Research Library

On Middle Lane between N. Van Buren St. and
N. Adams St., Rockville, MD 20850
301-340-2974

Montgomery County Archives

8540 Anniversary Circle, Gaithersburg, MD 20877
301-926-5002

Beall-Dawson House and Stonestreet Museum of 19th Century Medicine

103 W. Montgomery Ave., Rockville, MD 20850
301-340-2825

***Check MontgomeryHistory.org for the latest
information on hours of operation***